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Modernisation of Delhi and Domestic Transformations: An Analytical Study of Anita Desai's 'Clear Light of Day' and Ahmed Ali's 'Twilight in Delhi'

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Abstract: Delhi has borne witness to a plethora of changing rulers who considered Delhi their capital, which has always affected the life of the general populace that has called it their home and given them a choice either to change or be changed with the tide. This idea of a changing Delhi in colonial and post-colonial India is perhaps best reflected through works of Anita Desai and Ahmed Ali, specifically in '*Clear Light of Day*' and '*Twilight in Delhi*'. This present research paper is a humble submission to present a comparative analysis of both these texts to reveal the modernisation of Delhi and the subsequent effect that it has had on the domestic life, which is the centre of both these novels. Out of the 4 siblings around which the '*Clear Light of Day*' is centred, two have moved on in their lives and 'adapted' to the changes in Delhi, but two (Bimla and Baba) have sadly held on to the past very tightly. Similarly, in '*Twilight in Delhi*,' we see the breakdown of the family unit owing to Delhi's westernisation at the hands of the British and the decline of the Urdu culture leading to serious consequences for the domestic household. Both of these stories present the struggle of the common man who lives in Delhi and cannot bear the effects of the uncontrollable changes around them. All they can do is wither the storm until it passes and they have a firm ground to lay down the foundation for a new home and a new lifestyle.

Keywords: Domestication, Modernity, Homogenous, Religion, Politics, Westernisation.

Introduction: Delhi, with its rich cultural heritage and history, can be seen as a country in itself with its own spirit that both diverges from and mixes with the Indian national identity. I say so because Delhi has borne witness to countless dynasties and rulers who mostly made it their centre of control and, in the process, brought countless changes each time the administration changed. The ideal family unit that kept Delhi from falling apart used to be based on a traditional joint family structure but owing to the constant demand upon Delhi to be modernized, it has shifted to a nuclear structure that, to an urban working class, appears more convenient than anything else. There can be no better way to start this paper than by quoting the authors of Impact of modernization on family structure who point out:

"Modernity is a sense or idea of discontinuing the present with the past.
It is the idea of change in social as well as cultural processes (either through improvement or decline) in the society, and the present life

would be different from the life in the past... There is a number of different structures of families prevailing in different cultures.”¹

Main Text: This ‘modernity’ is contrasted beautifully through the works of Ahmed Ali and Anita Desai, specifically in ‘*Twilight in Delhi*’ and ‘*Clear Light of Day*’ where both these writers aptly construct a narrative that creates a homogenous mixture of politics and the domestic life that obviously run parallel to one another. I say contrasted because both of these novels are written in a different time and portray the plight of different people who live in the same place just a few decades apart. Bimla and Mir Nahal differ in their age, social and political circumstances yet manage to emerge as the upholders of traditional values and victims at the hands of modernity in both of the novels. Ahmed Ali’s introductory pages to *Twilight in Delhi* are perhaps the best introduction to Delhi itself:

“But the city of Delhi, built hundreds of years ago, fought for, died for, coveted and desired, built, destroyed and rebuilt, for five and six and seven times, mourned and sung, raped and conquered, yet whole and alive, lies indifferent in the arms of sleep. It was the city of kings and monarchs... But no king lives there today.”²

We must remember that the purpose of these writers is not at all to ‘document’ history but merely to reveal its gruesome consequences upon the individual that is not remarkable in any sense and, as a consequence, often goes neglected. Characters like Bim, who are content in living in the past no matter how much time passes, will always clash with characters like Tara (a noticeable catalyst for change),

“Tara lifted her hair from the back of her neck and let it fall again, luxuriantly, with a sigh. “How everything goes on and on here and never changes... “and it is all exactly the same, whenever we come home.”

‘Does that disappoint you?’ Bim asked dryly, giving her a quick sideways look. ‘Would you like to come back and find it changed?’”³

The importance of literature has never been in the accumulation of facts but the much-needed reflection of contemporary realities and the concealed effects of political developments in the lives of the common man. The setting of *Twilight in Delhi* reveals a time when the British rule is about to cement itself and modernization has resulted in the replacement of traditional values with Western ideas as can be seen in Asghar’s disapproval of his wife who is not as open about her sexuality as he would like but by any measure is a very good wife who respects and cares for his entire family,

“He (Asghar) would have liked to hear her (Belqueece) talk of love and happiness, her voice flowing like a sweet murmuring stream, talking of sad and beautiful things. He wanted her to kiss him and caress him, put her arms around his neck and whisper: ‘I love you, I love you...’ But she was a simple Indian girl, and did not know the ways of love...”⁴

Both of these characters represent the family unit that gets thrown into chaos with the unavoidable changes that have plagued Delhi for centuries. Critics have always pointed out the parallel between Mir Nihal and Bimla in that they are both representative of the past and old traditions that people feel should be changed. M. Shahbaz Arif and Hina Gull rightly point out,

“As Mir Nihal stands for old order of life which is not ready to give way to the changing conditions of time and eventually becomes crippled to keep pace with the time. He suffered defeat at the hands of new order of life in the form of the character of Asghar. Mir Nihal symbolizes the rigidity and stubbornness of old generation. Asghar is a representative of new generation who wants to change himself according to the exigencies of time.”⁵

Prakash Chandra, and Johaar Talukder are also of a similar opinion when talking about Bimla,

“Bim is like a living symbol of old Delhi – her thoughts, lifestyle, and the whole neighbourhood hardly budge when it comes to change. Her house, not even getting a fresh coat of paint, stands as proof of her unwavering commitment to tradition. Her mindset seems deeply connected to times long gone, resisting the pull of modern ways”⁶

Anita Desai writes neither of monarchs or politicians and only indirectly brings in major political figures like Gandhi and Jinnah yet manages to portray the drastic effect they had on the lives of civilians with both their actions and inactivity.

“‘Raja,’ she shouted, ‘Mahatma Gandhi’s been killed. Murdered. He’s dead.’... Raja hurried to the radio on his bookshelf and fiddled with the knobs in a kind of desperation. ‘Bim,’ he said, almost sobbing, ‘There’ll be more riots – killing – They’ll slaughter every Muslim they can find – anywhere.’”⁷

Ahmed Ali does the same thing through the character of Mir Nihal at the coronation on 7 December 1911.

“It was with a heavy heart that Mir Nihal went home, full of a sense of the futility and transience of the world. But great are the ravages of Time and no one can do anything against its indomitable might. Kings die and dynasties fall. Centuries and Aeons pass. But never a smile lights up the inscrutable face of Time”⁸

Anita Desai and Ahmed Ali have phenomenally woven their narratives to run parallel to the political events that are happening around the characters. *Clear Light of Day* takes place at the time of partition, and we see a rift or partition of sorts taking place between the siblings as well. Delhi of that time is divided between the Hindus and Muslims who are at each other’s throats, and unspeakable violence is taking place between them. Although we see no violence between Bimla and Raja, we can clearly see that Raja is more inclined towards the Islamic culture and religion than Hinduism. This rift between the two communities is mirrored by the rift between the two siblings who lived under one roof and were fond of each other from birth but now have become victim to irreconcilable differences which we see at the end when during their ‘partition’ there is much haste but no shred of violence, She kept calm while Raja packed his bags, put away all his things, telling her that now he would go to Hyderabad...

‘You don’t think I can go on living just to keep my brother and sister company, do you?’

‘I never said a word,’ said Bim coldly.

‘You don’t have to. It’s written all over your face. Just go, go take your face away. Don’t sit there staring. Don’t stop me.’

‘I Won’t stop you.’

‘I’m going.’

‘Go,’ said Bim.”⁹

Similarly, the domestic – political parallel in *Twilight in Delhi* is best highlighted at the end of the story by critics like Zehra Kazim who comments, “Ali tellingly ends the text with the symbolic image of a paralysed protagonist lying in bed traumatized by his past, a sign of what lies ahead in the fate of Delhi’s Muslims. Mir Nihal’s nostalgia is not emancipatory but traps him deeper into immobility, dejection, and delusion.”¹⁰

It would be criminal to end this paper without paying attention to the title “*Twilight in Delhi*” and “*Clear Light of Day*” because the essence of these novels cannot be better captured by any critic than the authors who couldn’t have chosen better titles. Twilight, as we all know, is the time of day when the sun has set but darkness has not completely descended yet. Ahmed Ali blatantly portrays the decline of the Old Delhi culture and, to a certain extent, the Islamic culture that gives way to a more “modernized” and Western culture, which now must be adopted by all citizens of Delhi. Whether this Twilight ends with the “*Clear Light of Day*” or not, we cannot say for certain because characters who are situated nearly a century apart are unable to adapt to the changes around them and would rather not move with the changing times. There can be no comment on the merits of

urbanization, but there can always be a question of whether urbanization or modernization is synonymous to westernization. Ahmed Ali and Anita Desai have tried their best to make the answer to this question particularly obvious to its readers, but we cannot deny the fact that change will always happen in Delhi, and it will never be isolated from the everyday lives of the common people. At this point, it is important to recall Deepak Laal, who reflects, “To promote the modernization sought worldwide, there is no need for the non-Western world to accept the cosmological beliefs promoted by Gregory the Great’s papal revolution of the sixth century (Westernization) societies can modernize without westernizing.”¹¹

Conclusion: The changing political circumstances in Delhi will always make people vulnerable to an identity crisis at any unpredictable time. One can never know which change will shatter the personal beliefs that one holds most dear. But at such junctures, we must remember that Delhi, as a state, is nothing if not adaptable, ensuring its perseverance in every condition. Prakash Chandra and Johaar Talukder also rightfully comment, “Delhi maintains its own rhythm blending tradition with change, unity with diversity and preserving its inherent connection to those who inhabit it or have departed.”¹²

No matter the changes that people have to struggle with, Delhi always has and always will adapt to them but there will always be a need for contemporary writers to write about contemporary times so that when people look back on the history of Delhi they know not only the many rulers or leaders who changed Delhi but also know that pitiful characters like Bimla and Mir Nihal existed who neither supported nor wanted any changes. Characters who, despite doing their best could not cope with such changes and retired amongst themselves to keep their traditions alive at least in their own memories.

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